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ברגשי כבוד מן המחב

E UNCHANGING LAW

SHEARITH ISRAEL'S HERITAGE AND HOPE

Sermon preached in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue Shearith Israel, Central Park West and Seventieth Street, New York City, on Sabbath Shuba, Tishri 3, 5677, September 30, 1916.

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THE UNCHANGING LAW

SHEARITH ISRAEL'S HERITAGE AND HOPE

"And Moses said unto all Israel, set your heart to all the words which I testify against you this day, that ye may command them to your children to observe and to do all the words of this Law. For it is not a thing too insignificant for you, but it is your life and through this thing you shall prolong your days in the land."

—Deuteronomy XXXII, 46, 47.

To the non-Jew, the phenomenon of our survival as a nation in face of the fall and disappearance of great empires and powerful states, is an inexplicable riddle. It appears to him a miracle that the weak and defenseless Jew has persisted through the homelessness, the rightlessness, the hatred, the persecution and the unrelenting inhumanity of humanity which have been his lot for two thousand years.

But we who live the Jewish life see no miracle in our survival. We know that our survival is the necessary outcome of our Law. The real miracle is this instrument of our persistence — the Law. Truly marvelous is the preservative and life-giving power of the God-given Torah, the Law which Moses taught us and which in his farewell message he solemnly impressed upon us as our life and the length of our days.

Can this claim, that the Law is the cause of our persistence as a people, be substantiated? It is one of our privileges, living as we do in these latter days, that we may measure the claims made by the Bible for the Law against the actual effects of the Law as seen in Jewish life. The stark facts of Jewish life and the plain teachings of Jewish history are the assays with which we are able to test the pragmatic validity of the Law. Moses himself in today's Parasha bade us apply this test in order to obtain a true understanding of the underlying providence in history. "Call to mind the days of old, scan the years of successive generations. Ask thy father, and he will recount to thee, thine elders, and they will tell thee."[1] When in dispassionate weighing of empirical facts we judge the Law by this standard of its practical results as attested by history, the claims made for the Jewish Law by Moses and other Biblical teachers are brilliantly vindicated. Indeed, not only does the Law prove to be an unequalled force for good in character building, safeguarding morality and ensuring individual and social happiness, but it proves to be essential for the preservation of the Jewish people.

No fact emerges more clearly from our history than this — that observance of the Law, and this alone, has preserved us as Jews, while disregard of the Law has rapidly induced the Jewish ruin of those who neglected it. Whenever we Jews have unbuckled the defensive armor of our Sabbath which differentiates us from our neighbors; whenever we have disregarded our own festivals, fasts and holydays, the dietary laws and the other distinctive ceremonies and rites which ensure our separatism and preserve our Jewish individuality, the giving up of these time-tested and time-hallowed defenses has meant our Jewish surrender to the forces of obliteration. These are unassailable historical facts.

Let others, therefore, talk in general terms of the need of modifying the law. They may voice theoretic claims of the necessity for progressing with the times. They may assert the putative need of modernizing and re-interpreting the Law. We serenely point to the relentless logic of history and show how observance of the traditional Law has been our life and the length of our days. We show how adherence to the Law has linked father and son, from generation to generation, in an unbroken chain of tradition. The voice of history tells us that when the Law of Jewish life has been broken or reformed away, groups and sects have formed themselves, and these sectarian groups, through growing divergence from the Jewish Law and growing conformity to the standards of non-Jewish neighbors, finally drifted out of Judaism.

Reform of Judaism, being essentially an assimilation or adaptation of Judaism to the standards of the non-Jewish environment, has always been and must always be progressive. Tampering with the Law is a process that once begun cannot be checked. It is the taking away of a brick here and a brick there, so that the weakening wall bulges under its weight more and more from the true until at last it crashes down in ruins.[2] Of what avail for defense is a wall that is breached? "He who breaks down a wall, a snake shall bite him," says the Preacher.[3] "He who makes a breach in the hedge of the Law," say the Rabbis, "gives entry to the insidious influences of destruction."[4]

Let us test this general affirmation by specific facts of recent history known to all of us. It is an illuminating historical truth that, with the exception of this congregation, which is two hundred and sixty years old, and our sister Sephardic congregation in Philadelphia, which is about one hundred and seventy years old, there is no Jewish congregation in the United States more than fifty or sixty years old which has not given way to the progressive influences of reform. These two are the only old congregations in which the congregant knows at all times where he stands and in

which he can be sure that the Judaism of today is the Judaism of yesterday and the Judaism of tomorrow. Every other old congregation has drifted from the moorings of the Law and has re-interpreted Judaism to suit both the advancing whims of its successive ministers, and the insistent demands for an easier religion made by congregations "who have not been willing to listen to the Law of God, who have said to the seers 'See not,' and to those who have visions, 'Give us no vision of the right. Speak to us easy words; see visions of pleasant illusions.' "[5]

Therefore, when the voice of criticism is raised and we are told of the supposititious need of reform, we in this synagogue do not even discuss these theoretic claims. We point to facts. We call attention to our stability and abiding continuity. We are content to stand the contrast with the fitful instability, capricious vagaries and, above all, the sterility of congregations which have gone from one reform to another. Liberal Jewish congregations may have a seemingly prosperous present; but they have cut themselves off from the past and have cut off from themselves the future. We, respecting the past and the future, give acquiescent recognition to the warning of the Sage "Remove not the ancient landmark which thy fathers set up."[6] Yea, we "hearken to our father who begat us and do not despise our mother when she is grown old."[7]

Today ten years ago I first entered this pulpit. I spoke then on the text that I have again chosen: "For the Law is your life and through it shall ye prolong your days." Then I advocated traditional Judaism because I had been so trained, and, perhaps, because I had not seen reform Judaism. Now I advocate traditional Judaism because I have seen reform Judaism and have appraised its inherent failure. These ten years of work, experience, study, thought and prayer have been for me years of growing clarification and determination of religious views. Now as the decennium closes, I embrace this opportunity of reaffirming the conviction grown far stronger within me with the lapse of years that strict and faithful adherence to the Law spells our Jewish life and the length of our days. As a *Sheliach Tsibbur,* minister, servant, mouthpiece of this congregation, I pledge myself anew, and the congregation which I serve, to abiding loyalty to the Law given us from God and expressed through the hallowed Judaism of our ancestors. Such individuality as the ministers of this congregation may possess must be exerted in other directions than in rewriting the prayer book, annulling the Law and explaining away the Bible.

We in this congregation cannot be hypnotised by the cry of the necessity for progressing with the spirit of the age; for we know that the dominant life in the lands of our dispersion is un-Jewish, and we refuse to endanger our traditional Jewish life by transforming it in response to every novel influence from without. We remember the fable told by Rabbi Akiba when he was found publicly studying and teaching the Law in defiance of the prohibition of the Roman government. He said: "A fox was once walking by a river bank, and he saw the fish in the water swimming about in great agitation." Spake the fox: "From what are you trying to escape?" The fish answered: "From the nets of fishermen." Then counselled the fox, "Come on to the dry land and let us live together in peace." But the fish answered, "O fox, called the wisest of animals, but in truth the most foolish, if we are in danger in our lifegiving element, how much the more danger would we face in the element that means our death?" "Even so," said Rabbi Akiba, "if observance of Judaism is difficult, it is at least our natural element and our life, as it is written "for it is your life and the length of your days."[8] How much better off are we with the Law and its difficulties than without the Law, but facing certain destruction."[9]

The Law is our life and the length of our days. Loyalty unswerving to the life of the Law and the Law of our life — that shall remain the tradition, that the policy, that the motto of this congregation. "Set your hearts to all the words which I testify against you this day, that ye may command them to your children to observe and to do all the words of this Law. For it is not a thing too insignificant for you, but it is your life and through this thing you shall prolong your days in the land."

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① Deuteronomy XXXII, 7.
② Isaiah XXX, 13.
③ Ecclesiastes X, 8.
④ Abodah Sarah 27b.
⑤ Isaiah XXX, 9, 10.
⑥ Proverbs XXII, 28; Sifri to Deuteronomy XVII, 14, with the revision of Elijah Gaon.
⑦ Proverbs XXIII, 22; Mishna Berachoth IX, 5 and Rashi Berachoth 54a.
⑧ Deuteronomy XXX, 20.
⑨ Berachoth 61b.

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